



Pope to Rectors of Shrines: Keeping popular piety alive



Pope Francis meets Rectors and Pastoral Workers of Shrines, encouraging them to make pilgrims feel “at home” and to help them enrich their popular piety.

By Seàn-Patrick Lovett

A Shrine is a church, or other sacred place, which is visited by people who come as pilgrims to pray, or to seek grace and consolation. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such locations all over the world. And the tradition of visiting and praying at a Shrine is as old as the Church itself.

On Thursday morning in the Vatican, Pope Francis met with some of those responsible for these Shrines and sacred places, Rectors and Pastoral Workers, currently attending an International Conference on the topic.

Shrines are irreplaceable

Reflecting on the contemporary importance of Shrines, the Pope described them as places where people gather “to express their faith in simplicity, and according to the various traditions that have been learned since childhood.” In this sense, he said, “Shrines are irreplaceable because they keep popular piety alive.”

Places of welcome

Shrines must always be places of welcome, said Pope Francis, and pilgrims must always be made to feel at home, “like a long-awaited family member who has finally arrived.” Many people visit a Shrine, said the Pope, because of its works of art, or because it is located in a beautiful natural environment.

“When these people are welcomed,” he said, “they become more willing to open their hearts and let them be shaped by Grace.”

Places of prayer

Above all, said Pope Francis, the Shrine is a place of prayer. Most of our Shrines are dedicated to Our Lady: “Here the Virgin Mary opens the arms of her maternal love to listen to the prayer of each and every one”, he said. “Here she smiles, offering consolation. Here she sheds tears with those who weep... Here she becomes the companion on the road of every person who raises their eyes to her asking for grace, and certain of being heard.”

Places of reconciliation

No one visiting a Shrine should feel like a stranger, said the Pope, especially when they come weighed down by sin. “The Shrine is a privileged place to experience mercy that knows no boundaries,” he said. “When mercy is experienced, it becomes a form of real evangelization, because it transforms those who receive it into witnesses of mercy.” Praying in silence, or with pious formulas and gestures learned as a child, “each one must be helped to express themselves in personal prayer.”

It is this prayer, concluded Pope Francis, that makes Shrines such fruitful places “where popular piety is nourished and grows.”